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Widening access to Classics in the UK: how the Impact, Public Engagement, Outreach and Knowledge Exchange agenda has helped

1600-1700 words

How the Impact and Public Engagement agenda has helped – Dr Michael Scott, University of Warwick

Impact and Public Engagement are now firmly, and without doubt, part of the UK Universities agenda. This has, however not always been the case. Pre 2013-4, while departments and universities to differing extents encouraged and supported their academics to take on (in addition to their normal university duties) public engagement work (above all within schools), and while UK Classicists in particular had a strong track record of public engagement as part of the more general push to ensure the continued survival and growth of their subject, there was perceived to be little gain for the university in such efforts beyond brand recognition and a warming sense of giving back. Indeed, in some cases, taking on public engagement projects alongside academic research, was counselled against in case it led to a devaluing of academic reputation.

Much of that changed post the decision to include 'impact' as 20% of a department's mark in the [Research Excellence Framework \(REF\) exercise of 2013-4](#). [The REF is a national system to assess the quality of research within the UK's higher education institutions, and the results are linked directly to how much funding each institution subsequently receives from government. In turn 'impact' was defined as "an effect on, change or benefit to the economy, society, culture, public policy or services, health, the environment or quality of life, beyond academia."](#)ⁱ As a result, promoting, supporting and engaging successfully with impact not only had a financial upside for universities as part of their overall REF settlement, but was also a new measure in which universities could compete for rankings and thus overall UK position. Over the same period, many research councils in the UK moved to formally demand detailed plans of impact activities as part of academic research project proposals, and indeed created calls for projects specifically geared towards impact.

It's fair to say that not many academics involved with the impact submission for REF 2013-4 remember the experience fondly. As with the introduction of any new measure, there were substantial difficulties in understanding the meaning of 'impact' as defined by REF, producing case-studies that reflected sufficiently that definition, and most crucially, collecting and providing the qualitative and quantitative evidence required to prove effective impact (especially as the impact measure was introduced part way through the REF cycle). While those who undertook public engagement work in direct relation to specific academic research projects and outputs, and who did so in ways that allowed them easily to gather the necessary data (focused on demonstrating how peoples' understanding and knowledge had been changed as a direct result of contact with their specific piece of public engagement), were well versed to create an impact 'case-study', those whose public engagement work was more widely spread across their discipline rather than directly related to their own specific research outputs, or who reached out to much less tangible and contactable

(but often bigger) audiences, had to work harder to make their public engagement ‘fit’ a REF impact case-study.

The build up to REF 2013-4, the assessment of the submissions by the different REF panels, and specifically the impact element of the REF, have also now been studied by Lord Stern, who has produced recommendations for the next REF exercise, scheduled for 2020-21.ⁱⁱ His recommendations in particular advocated a loosening of the demands for what an impact case-study looks like, allowing for the inclusion of wider public engagement initiatives. And while we do not yet know how impact will be officially defined and by what criteria it needs to be measured in 2020-21 (which in itself is a problem for people doing impact/public engagement work since 2014 as they can only guess at the yard stick they will be asked to measure themselves against in 2020-1), it is likely in my view, that impact will form an even bigger part of the REF exercise, and so grow further in importance for [universities](#). That is certainly the view being taken by [universities](#), who since 2014 have been spending a lot more time, money and effort in supporting impact projects and impact measuring by their academics in preparation for 2020-1.

How has this re-orientation of the University agenda towards officially promoting and supporting impact as part of the ‘role’ of the University in the 21st century helped the provision specifically of Classics in the UK? In relation to my department at Classics at Warwick, I think the answer is a positive one. On the one hand, department members have been very successful in securing large external Arts and Humanities Research Council grants with deeply embedded public engagement and impact agendas (e.g. Prof Alison Cooley’s Ashmolean Latin Inscriptions Project (AshLI) with its extensive public engagement provision for the public as well as specifically for schools, and the recent securing of an AHRC Follow-on Funding for Impact and Engagement award).ⁱⁱⁱ And at the same time, many members of the department have felt much more supported in giving our time to regularly speak in schools across the country - both those who do not currently offer any Classical teaching and those with partial and full Classical offerings.

The biggest difference, though, is the way in which we have been encouraged and supported to develop our own major public engagement events and initiatives for schools, and as a result begin to build lasting networks of public engagement and support across schools in our local area. Since 2014, for example, Warwick Classics has significantly expanded its Warwick Classics Drama Festival. Built around the pre-existing tradition of the Warwick Classics [undergraduates](#) putting on a Greek tragedy/comedy each year, we have secured [sufficient funding](#) from the university in each year since 2014 to move this performance to the main stage of the Warwick Arts Centre with professional backstage support, host a public performance and crucially a [schools’ day](#). This full day event, free to all attendees, includes a series of lectures and seminars from Warwick Classics staff about the play, its themes and the context of dramatic production in ancient Greece, alongside a performance of the play. In 2015 and 2016, this event was filled to capacity with 560+ school children from around the country, both those studying Classical subjects and those not, with strong positive feedback. It is now the largest Arts and Humanities public engagement event hosted at Warwick. In 2016 we sought to expand its reach by working with [one of](#) Warwick’s Outreach Schools programmes [\(known as IGGY\)](#) and other groups to film

both the play and short ‘bite-size’ versions of the lectures, which are now on-line as part of an increasing range of school teaching resources for Classics.^{iv}

It is through this flagship event that we have also sought to build more permanent relationships with schools who are seeking to expand their Classics provision. One such example is the Sidney Stringer Academy in Coventry. Sidney Stringer is an inner-city non-selective academy for 11 to 18 year olds which has a rich cultural diversity; the vast majority of pupils come from a British-Asian Muslim background. The local area has a very high level of unemployment and social and economic disadvantage. A high proportion of students receive free school meals and the 16-19 Bursary Fund. [The school first](#) brought students to the Warwick Classics drama festival in 2014. Since then, we have developed the relationship between Warwick Classics and Sidney Stringer with individual talks by Warwick PGs and staff at Sidney Stringer alongside continued attendance at the Drama Festival, as well as supporting [the Head of Classics](#) in her work to expand the provision of Latin (and ancient Greek) in the school curriculum. I also took on the role of co-Director of the Sidney Stringer Classics Hub alongside [the Head of Classics at Sidney Stringer and the Head of Classics at Warwick School](#). This Hub was successful in winning a Classics for All project grant in 2014-5 to expand the provision of Latin and Greek across the school.^v It has also recently been successful in a second Classics for All grant to introduce GCSE Ancient Greek onto the curriculum, and the Hub is now looking to become a centre for teacher training to help introduce Latin at other schools in the area.

None of this would have been possible without the substantial financial support of Warwick University and its widening range of impact and public engagement funds, as well as support from IATL, the University’s Institute for Advanced Teaching and Learning. In the future, we hope to harness the University’s increased support for impact, public engagement [and widening participation](#) activities to achieve three major goals. The first is to make impact and public engagement (as well as [widening participation/outreach](#)), specifically targeted at supporting access to Classics in schools, an activity which [undergraduates, postgraduates](#) and [staff](#) from the department can work on together as a joint project. [In this regard](#) the department supports financially a [postgraduate](#) Outreach ambassador and a series of [undergraduate](#) ambassadors who help at key public engagement events and are encouraged to contribute to wider schools’ initiatives (the Warwick Classics [postgraduate students](#) for example developed and taught the first Warwick Sutton Trust Summer School in Classics in 2016).

The second goal is to continue to grow the range of Classics teaching resources for schools provided by Warwick Classics, not only through future Drama Festivals, but also by linking to projects created out of our teaching modules (e.g. videos created by students in our Hellenistic world modules published on our Warwick Classics Youtube channel; [our regular coin and textual criticism blogs](#); and the ancient Greek sacred sites database – already being used as a research database by schools – created by the Greek Religion module).^{vi} In addition, the University has also, thanks to its securing of [Higher Education Innovation Funding \(HEIF\) from HEFCE \(Higher Education Funding Council for England\)](#), been able to support the department with a major strategic impact grant to develop a new ancient global history web portal ([Oiko.world](#)), for use by the public and in schools, to bring different ancient

civilisations existing around the globe in antiquity into comparison and connection with one another. The third goal is to continue to strengthen Warwick Classics' position within the community by developing further our permanent links with local schools and supporting Classics provision in association with our neighbouring universities in the West Midlands. In 2018 and 2019, Warwick Classics will also be a partner university in the AHRC-funded national Advocating Classics Education (ACE) project. Working with ACE, along with Classics for All, and the Warwick University Widening Participation Development Fund, we hope to be able to expand the number of Classics hubs (copying with model developed with Sidney Stringer Academy) within the West Midlands.

The example of Warwick Classics, I think, shows how much has been achieved following the introduction of the impact agenda. It has encouraged universities to not only value but support, both in terms of digital and administrative resources and finance, a wide range of public engagement and outreach activities intended for a wider range of audiences, as well as their curation into impact narratives. And while we still do not know what Impact for REF 2020-1 will look like in detail, the spreading of Classics provision in UK schools will, I hope, continue to be well served by this new agenda.

ⁱ The meaning of 'impact' and its distinction from public engagement and outreach work has been much debated. Here, impact is understood not as a particular kind of activity, but as a particular story line of activities: an academic publication plus resulting public engagement/outreach work link directly to the publication plus recording and measuring of the changing understanding/outlook of those members of the public who have been engaged through those activities. Taken all together, these elements make up an 'impact case-study' for REF.

ⁱⁱ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/research-excellence-framework-review>

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http://www2.warwick.ac.uk/fac/arts/classics/research/dept_projects/latininscriptions/

^{iv} <http://www2.warwick.ac.uk/fac/arts/classics/research/outreach/>

^v <http://classicsforall.org.uk/case-studies/sidney-stringer-academy-in-coventry>

This is not the only Classics for All project Warwick Classics has been involved with in the Midlands: Warwick Classics [postgraduate students](#) and staff have also contributed to projects teaching teachers how to deliver [Classical](#) subjects in the classroom in the Birmingham area (Solihull Consortium 2014)

^{vi} https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCbOUT4_M3WXXKuEeIhYRYRA

<http://www2.warwick.ac.uk/fac/arts/classics/students/modules/greekreligion/database/>